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North Yemeni-Libyan Relations:
A Tactical Rapprochement

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Summary

The warming trend in North Yemeni-Libyan relations appears to be based primarily on tactical considerations of mutual convenience. From the perspective of North Yemen President 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih, Libyan military and economic assistance has provided his beleaguered regime with a much needed shot in the arm. Libyan leader Qadhafi's interest in the relationship is aimed at reducing his isolation, gaining support for his war in Chad, and undermining US influence in the region. Salih is concerned about US and Western reactions to flirtations with Tripoli, but he apparently had decided that the tangible benefits of closer ties outweigh the political costs. In our judgment, relations between North Yemen and Libya will continue to improve in the near term, but the longer term outlook is questionable and will be troubled by recurring political differences and the volatility of Qadhafi's foreign policy.

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This memorandum was prepared at the request of Donald Gregg, Assistant to the Vice President for National Security Affairs, by Peninsula Branch, Persian Gulf Division, with contributions by Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Persian Gulf Division, NESA

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North Yemen finds itself caught between the conflicting interests of the United States--on which it relies to balance Soviet and Saudi influence in North Yemen--and Libya from which it receives badly needed economic assistance and military cooperation. North Yemeni President 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih does not want to offend the United States and generally tries to downplay his relationship with Qadhafi. But Salih is obligated to Qadhafi for assistance rendered and will respond to Libyan requests, sometimes at the expense of US interests.

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The value President Salih places on his relationship with Libya was demonstrated by his emphasis on Libyan issues in September during talks with the US delegation to North Yemen's 25th anniversary National Day celebrations--partly financed by Libya. Over the past year, Tripoli's assistance has been one of the few bright spots for Salih's regime.

- Unable to secure Saudi backing for his policy toward Aden, Salih accepted a Libyan offer to provide significant economic and military support for the more than 30,000 exiles who fled to North Yemen in January 1986 with deposed South Yemeni President Ali Nasir.
- Tripoli also helped to fill the gap when Riyadh failed to deliver promised economic assistance to North Yemen and cut oil shipments to force Salih to negotiate contentious border issues. [redacted] Libya is providing North Yemen with at least 15,000 barrels of oil per day--approximately one-half its domestic requirement--on generous concessionary terms. The arrangement expires in November.
- [redacted] promised to supply North Yemen with SCUD tactical missiles and SA-6 surface-to-air missiles after the Soviets rebuffed Sanaa's request for advanced weapon systems late last year. At least two hundred North Yemeni troops currently are in Libya receiving training on these systems, which Sanaa expects to receive within the next six months. [redacted]

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North Yemeni Motivations

In our judgment, Salih believes that Libyan economic and military aid--in the absence of Saudi economic assistance and declining US aid levels--has played a pivotal role in shoring up his beleaguered regime. Salih's inability to satisfy popular expectations raised by the prospects of oil revenues or to resolve North Yemen's troubled relations with its neighbors has begun to alienate key constituencies, such as the military and the tribes. Libyan military assistance has

helped to satisfy Salih's critics within the defense establishment. [redacted]

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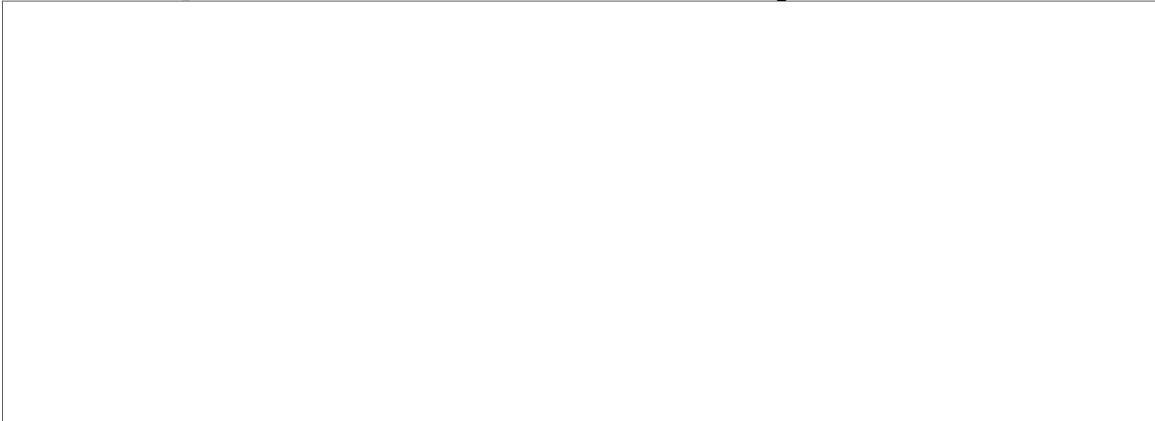
Salih's relations with Libya also have helped to further his limited arms diversification program designed to decrease North Yemen's dependence on direct Soviet military assistance and advisors. Libya has been Salih's only significant source of arms outside of the Soviet Union since the January 1986 civil war in South Yemen. [redacted]

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From North Yemen's perspective, Salih's reciprocations for Libyan aid have been relatively modest. Salih has:

- Provided limited military and diplomatic support to Libya's campaign in Chad; North Yemen has facilitated the transfer of approximately 2,300 South Yemeni exile military personnel to Libya and has given the Libyans a vague promise to send North Yemeni regulars as well.

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- Mediated between Libya and Egypt over the return of a Libyan C-130 transport aircraft and its crew after the pilot and copilot defected in early 1987. [redacted]

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Libyan Motivations: Increased Influence

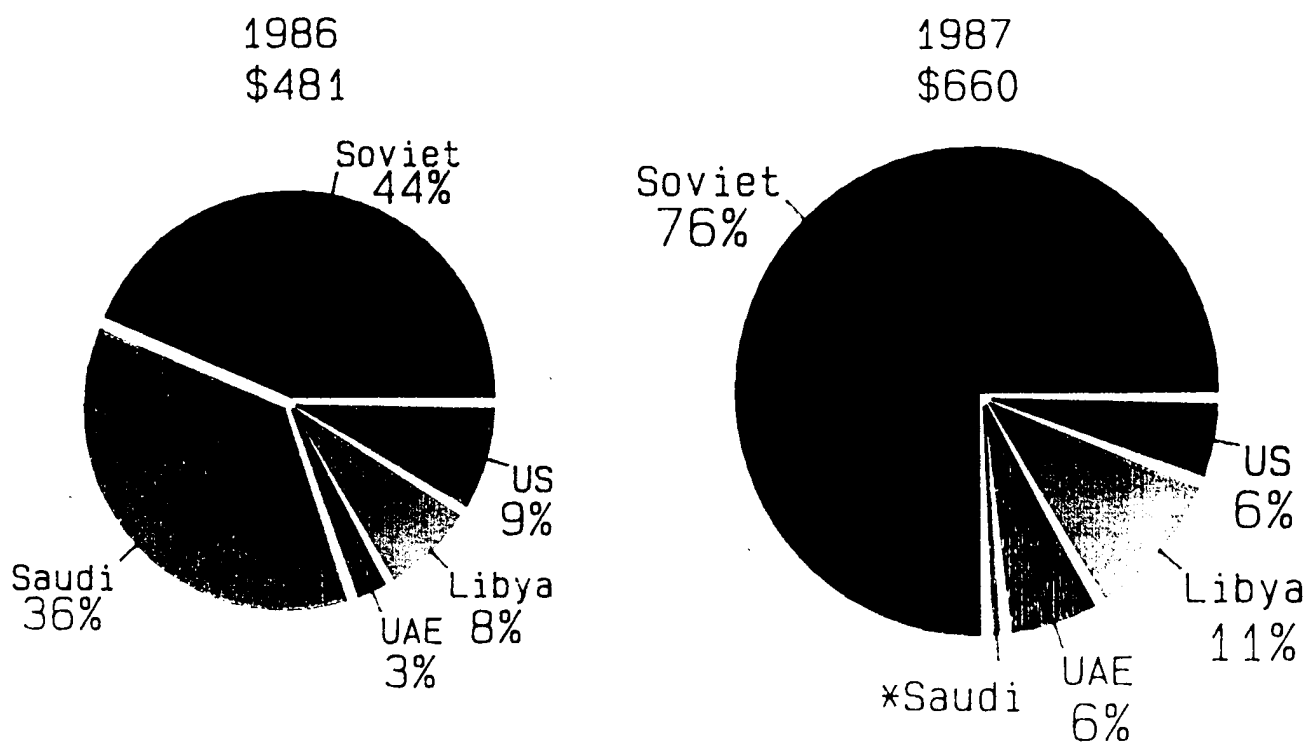
Libyan leader Qadhafi's interest in North Yemen dovetails with several broader policy objectives in the Arab world. Qadhafi's repeated attempts since June 1986 to mediate the repatriation of the South Yemeni exiles in North Yemen reflect his desire to reduce his isolation and ultimately gain a leadership role in the Arab world. His provision of arms to the exiles and economic and military assistance to North Yemen are part of an effort to gain leverage with both parties. Qadhafi almost certainly hopes to use this leverage to draw North Yemen away from the United States. He probably is also attracted by North Yemen's proximity to Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, and Somalia, periodic targets of Libyan subversion. [redacted]

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Economic and Military Aid to North Yemen

1986-1987

(Millions of US Dollars)



* Less than 1% of total aid for 1987



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[REDACTED]

The relationship has provided several important tactical opportunities for Qadhafi:

- Salih's visit to Libya in the summer of 1986, the first by a head of state following the US airstrike in April, helped ease Qadhafi's concern about international isolation.
- North Yemeni support for his war with Chad will ease some of the combat burden on Libyan forces and possibly also reduce domestic political pressures.
- Visits to North Yemen by low-level Libyan officials and representatives of the revolutionary committees provide a safety valve against domestic discontent by giving his regime the appearance of acceptance in the Arab world.
- Yemeni intercession with Baghdad probably helped the restoration of Libyan-Iraqi relations last month. [REDACTED]

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In Qadhafi's view, the military and economic aid provided to Sanaa is a low-cost way of obtaining Sanaa's support. The military equipment given by Tripoli constitutes only a fraction of Libya's inventory and will not diminish Libyan military capabilities. Libyan economic and technical aid, particularly in the form of oil, also is affordable. [REDACTED]

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Prospects for the Relationship

In our judgment, the short term prospects for the relationship are good. In North Yemen, the impetus for pursuing the relationship comes from Salih, and there is no evidence of inner circle discord on this issue. [REDACTED]

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The outlook for the long-term relationship is less positive. North Yemeni-Libyan relations traditionally have been characterized by deep mistrust and, despite the upswing in bilateral activity, considerable mutual suspicion still is evident. Salih suspects that Qadhafi will continue to back North Yemeni dissidents, particularly the Nassirist-oriented "13 June Movement" with which Qadhafi has close ties. Moreover, Qadhafi may worry that North Yemen will simply use Tripoli to get assistance, but will suspend political support for Tripoli's foreign policy. [REDACTED]

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We believe that Salih is aware of the risks he faces in dealing with Qadhafi. Tripoli has a history of meddling in

[redacted]

North Yemen's internal affairs, including support for coup attempts in 1978 and 1982 and substantial backing for the South Yemeni-sponsored National Democratic Front insurgency until 1982. [redacted]

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In our judgment, Salih will be unable to satisfy the mercurial Libyan leader indefinitely. [redacted]

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[redacted]

Should Salih refuse to provide North Yemeni regulars it would reduce Qadhafi's stake in the relationship and probably derail future arms agreements. [redacted]

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In addition, Salih's relationship with Libya undoubtedly will cause him further problems with Saudi Arabia. According to the US Embassy in Riyadh, the Saudis have expressed their displeasure over the improvement in North Yemeni-Libyan ties, citing it as a factor in their growing irritation with Salih. [redacted]

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In response to these and other concerns, Salih has made an effort to limit the Libyan role in his country. [redacted]

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Implications for the United States

We believe Salih will work to assure Washington that his relationship with Libya will not be detrimental to US interests. Nonetheless, Salih will weigh the amount of US aid and support against that from Libya and conclude that the Libyan connection offers more tangible benefits. To demonstrate his evenhandedness, Salih can be expected to continue offers to mediate between Washington and Tripoli. [redacted]

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[redacted]

Over the longer term, US-North Yemeni ties will not suffer a serious dislocation, if only because Salih recognizes the value of US economic and oil development aid and limited military assistance. His relationship with the United States will seem even more valuable as his association with Qadhafi inevitably loses its luster. Salih also will continue to appreciate the role the United States plays as a counterweight to the Soviet presence in North Yemen and as a sympathetic voice in dealing with the Saudis. [redacted]

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Chronology of North Yemen-Libyan Ties

1978

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Oct Libyan-sponsored unsuccessful coup attempt against Salih; Sanaa freezes relations with Tripoli.

Dec Libya promises to finance development projects
 Libyan ambassador returns to Sanaa.

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1979

May North Yemen Ambassador presents credentials in Tripoli. Bilateral economic agreements signed.

Nov Salih makes first official visit to Tripoli.

1980-82 Tension increases in relationship as evidence grows of continuing Libyan subversion against Salih regime grows.

1982

Mar Libyan-backed plot assassinate Salih uncovered.

Oct Salih's forces defeat the Front.

1983

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Jul Qadhafi receives red-carpet treatment during official visit to North Yemen; offers arms and oil and other economic assistance.

1984-85 Limited bilateral activity. No evidence promised
Libyan aid delivered.

1986

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Apr Salih publicly supports Libya after US attack on Tripoli.

Salih reproaches US Vice President for attack,
requests EC Chiefs of Mission in Sanaa not to back US
action.

Libyan-backed shooting of US Embassy official in
Sanaa.

May North Yemeni Foreign Minister travels to Libya and
extracts apology from Qadhafi, further aid
commitments.

Jun Salih meets South Yemeni counterpart under Libya's
auspices.

Oct North Yemen accepts Libyan offer of oil assistance.

Nov North Yemen cancels visit of US CINCCENTCOM to avoid
jeopardizing Libyan aid.

[Redacted]

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1987

Feb

[Redacted]

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Salih cancels visit to US.

Mar

Libya promises discounted oil and military aid to
Sanaa

[Redacted]

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Salih visits Libya in exchange for \$30 million.

[Redacted]

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